

## University of Dundee

### The Voices of Street Children and Youth

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# THE VOICES OF STREET CHILDREN AND YOUTH

## Knowledge Exchange in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 6 • October 2015

### KEY POINTS

- Street children and youth are the experts on their own lives.
- Through communication skills development and training, street children and youth can learn to recognise their own knowledge and ability to inform others about street life.
- Engaging with stakeholders builds confidence, respect and self-worth, with positive aspects for young people's daily lives beyond policy and practice.
- Listening to street children and youth can help governments and NGOs to improve the targeting and effectiveness of their services.

### INTRODUCTION

Street children and youth exercise resilience and capabilities on a daily basis, but are often ignored and sometimes harmed through being on the streets.

*Growing up on the Streets* research has been working in partnership with street children and youth since 2012, and recognises the invaluable contribution they can make to informing others about the realities of young urban lives.

In 2015 the *Growing up on the Streets* Knowledge Exchange programme, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), was put in place: to support street children and youth to recognise the value of their own experiences, to understand that they are experts on street life, and to develop their role as spokespeople. The aim was also to address the right of street children and youth to participate in decisions that affect their lives. If they are listened to and their views taken seriously, stakeholders (including governments, communities, organisations, individuals, service providers and policy makers) can deliver more effective strategies to support them.



Training Workshop, Accra.

### KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE TRAINING: ITS PURPOSE AND VALUE

Street children and youth learn many skills on the street, often making them expert communicators within their own contexts, but they have few opportunities to engage within formal NGO or governmental settings. Entry into such spaces can be intimidating for some; while for others the thought of talking to people whom they resent for their lack of support can make them want to react angrily.

"At first I was afraid... I was very nervous"

(Estelle, Bukavu).

"I had planned to lash those people in authority who have treated me badly with words of insult. 'You! When I was pregnant you beat me and I started bleeding...' I would have said something that will make the person feel very bad" (Josephine, Accra).

In order to bring young voices into discussions with governments and NGOs, a series of knowledge exchange training workshops were developed to help young people to formulate what they wanted to say; to feel confident to talk to government officials and senior NGO representatives; and to engage in meaningful discussion about their lives in an open and non-confrontational manner.

The *Growing up on the Streets Knowledge Exchange Training Pack* contains the training and workshop materials and is an open source document available via the project website (see page 4).

Following the workshops, participants commented that practicing speaking to an audience, advising each other and working together had not only given them practical skills but also confidence. They realised that they had something valuable to contribute as equal participants in discussions with stakeholders.

"The training helped me [with] the way to stand, and look, and how to organise my ideas. But we were the ones who gave ourselves – the training helped with our delivery, but the content came entirely from ourselves" (Estelle, Bukavu).

"The training gave me confidence to talk to them.... they respect me, and treat me differently; because they see me at a different level than if they just assumed that I had no money" (Goodwill, Harare).

"I was trained to observe; but now I have been trained to talk in public. I will feel relaxed; I will not feel tense. Even if I should see John Mahama (President of Ghana) I will have the ability to be calm and express myself" (Josephine, Accra).

Quotes are taken from interviews with research assistants conducted in June and September 2015 in Accra, Bukavu and Harare.



The opportunity to engage in knowledge exchange built upon earlier ethnographic training and up to three years' experience acting as research assistants; listening, observing and reporting on their network.

The training aimed to empower street children and youth with the skills to recognise their knowledge and, by becoming effective spokespeople, exchange this information with those who hold positions of power over their lives.

## ENGAGING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Knowledge exchange events were held in each of the three cities to enable street children and youth, who had participated in the research and knowledge exchange training, to talk with stakeholders. These comprised of meetings with both frontline workers and policy makers in each city, and a Peer Network meeting in Harare with NGO representatives from eight African countries. Casting any fears aside, the young people felt very positive about participating in settings where they could share their experiences and be listened to. A sense of purpose and possibility for change was created, with the onus now on governments and NGOs to use the knowledge gained for improving young people's lives on the street.

"I felt like a teacher; because I was teaching someone who didn't know. They didn't know much about the street, but they call themselves street workers" (Papa, Accra)

"When they say something, I tell them 'no...'; I gave them more explanation [on the issue] and they understood it. So they realised that what they were saying is not real" (Jonathan, Accra).

Young people were confident enough to challenge the views of adults and respond to incorrect assumptions about street children and youth or life on the street. By providing expert testimony and being able to lead discussions with stakeholders, young people demonstrated resilience and the capabilities needed to live on the street, as well as the ability to communicate their experiences.

In all three cities, it was evident that professionals working with street children and youth, although seeking to act in their best interests, do not always consider young people's perspectives when designing programmes and services. When confronted with the realities of street life, stakeholders acknowledged that often policy is based on assumptions and may not fully address the needs of the young people they are targeting.

"People were like crazy – very shocked when I came up with my life story; that I have lived on the streets all my life. I was born on the streets and have grown up on the streets to this age, I have survived.... People came up to me and said that they have changed the way they thought about street children in a positive way, so I think they will do something" (Jonathan, Accra).

A *Growing up on the Streets* Peer Network member, who engaged with research assistants from the three cities at the Knowledge Exchange Conference in Harare in September 2015 (see picture), commented afterwards that:

"To hear the [young people] talking about their lives... was WOW! It was the most rewarding experience in my life. It was so emotional to hear their stories. Really tough. I think I cried. I was reminded that even if I am a street worker, I am a human being first and the words can be tough to hear.... Although it was challenging to listen to [them], it was so impressive that they were comfortable and confident sharing their stories" (Peer Network member).

"That day I will never forget in my life. I came from the street and I was meeting people from different organisations and NGOs to sit with them and share my story" (Eric, Accra).



"We were not treated like how others would have treated street children; we were treated fairly. The food our managers ate is the same thing we also ate. We were treated equally" (Jonathan, Accra).

## BENEFITS TO DAILY LIFE

Going beyond engagement with stakeholders, the young people who participated in Knowledge Exchange felt that thinking about their communication skills and applying them in practical settings also has benefit throughout their daily lives. For many, the opportunity to discuss and think about their interactions with others has helped them to act as spokespeople for other street children. Where previously limited education had made many feel unable to talk to police or area guards, they have used their new confidence to negotiate with authorities.

"I will never be shy to meet any group of people again. If you should ask me to speak in front of market women; I will be able to talk" (Constance, Accra).

"This training helped me to be able to talk in public, not only to this category of person [NGO stakeholders] but to any person" (Didier, Bukavu).

"I have my friends and some elders around my area, if maybe we are in need of something I can go to the assembly man and discuss it with him. I can discuss with him about the refuse site and place of convenience; I can let him know some of the things that will help us. I can tell him that if we clean the place, then issues with malaria and other things will be dealt with" (Eric, Accra).



## IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Engaging with street children and youth as experts, and taking their views into account has highlighted a need for stakeholders to re-think their approach. The *Growing up on the Streets* Knowledge Exchange training and stakeholder events have:

- Demonstrated that when supported and given an opportunity street children and youth can make meaningful contributions to discussions on policy and programme design.
- Highlighted the unique skillset and knowledge gained from experience living and working on the street and changed stakeholder perceptions
- Built the confidence of young people to recognise the value of their own knowledge and the skills to engage government and NGOs in dialogue.
- Involved a range of practitioners from across African to engage with and hear the experiences and opinions of street youth.

"That conference with the authorities produced good results. We walk around when and where we want and the police or the soldiers will not arrest you" (Abdou, Bukavu).

"We are free to move around these days. Our mates went to plead our case before the mayor of the town and I really saw that the job is being done" (Ntamu, Bukavu).

"The leader of [government department]; he got up and said they are sorry because they didn't know. He said personally he wasn't aware of that; so he admitted his mistakes" (Sarah, Accra).

"They came to understand that being on the street doesn't mean that we are armed robbers, or that we fight just anyhow; we explained to them, and they understood us better" (Eric, Accra).

"I noticed that [a stakeholder], at first she was against us, but towards the end of the workshop, she was agreeing with us" (Goodwill, Harare).

## A CALL TO ACTION

The findings from the Knowledge Exchange programme represent a challenge to governments, NGOs and other service providers who are working with, and for, street children and youth. This necessitates a call to action for stakeholders: to place children's right to participate and be respected centrally in policy and practice; to facilitate appropriate opportunities to listen to street children and youth expressing their views; and to allow them to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. This may require a departure from pre-conceived assumptions based on current discourse or legislation.



Knowledge Exchange Conference, Harare, September 2015.

"What would be a problem for me is if nothing changes" (Jonathan, Accra).

"They were appreciative of what I said, but now it's up to them" (Taurai, Harare).

"The authorities should listen and consider our opinions. We have a problem and they are at that position in order to defend and protect all the people without any discrimination. We should not be mistreated simply because we are street children" (Baba, Bukavu)



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